

The Stolenwealth Games and the Black GST: Wednesday, November 30, 2005

**** To anyone concerned about the injustices faced by Indigenous peoples in Australia ****

What does it mean to be a non-Indigenous person living on stolen land? What do the issues of attempted genocide, sovereignty and treaty mean for the Indigenous peoples of this continent? What can non-Indigenous people do to end our occupation of their lands?

These are burning questions that I feel need to be addressed, if we are to end racism and work towards justice for Indigenous peoples.

I am writing this article to share some of my questions and thoughts on these issues, stimulated by an emerging campaign led by some Indigenous activists named the Black GST (see www.blackgst.com), which is organising protests at the 2006 'Stolenwealth' Games in Melbourne. This campaign is encouraging me to delve more deeply into what it means to be a non-Indigenous Australian who is profiting, enjoying privileges and engaging in economic and spiritual activities on stolen land.

Many Indigenous leaders such as Marji Thorpe, Gary Foley, Robbie Thorpe and Michael Mansell have stressed that Native Title and Reconciliation haven't addressed Indigenous rights on this continent. Their feeling is that Native Title has mainly embroiled Indigenous peoples in complex legal processes where they have (generally unsuccessfully) had to 'prove' their fundamental human rights to the land. It puts the onus on Indigenous peoples to somehow prove continuous connection with their land, an impossible task in many situations given the effects of our dispossession and attempted genocide.

A more just process would do the reverse, accepting that Indigenous peoples have sacred connections and rights to this land exercised over tens of thousands of years. It would recognize that it is not for us to use our legal systems to grant and police these rights for Indigenous peoples. It would put the onus on non-Indigenous people to prove why we should be entitled to exercise the rights to the land that we currently enjoy.

Many Indigenous people believe that the land and sea have bestowed special responsibilities on them to be their custodians. Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices have developed in response to this sacred co-evolving. It does not need to be proven through white man's law.

Many Indigenous people believe that the Reconciliation process has also failed them. The concept of reconciliation is based on the approach that Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples need to 'reconcile their differences'. It reinforces the concept that both parties have been aggrieved, and that they now need to come to peace with each other.

This reminds me of the position taken by the United Nations and the U.S. government during the early stages of the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The then UN Secretary General, Boutris Boutris-Ghali stated that the killings were the result of "Hutus killing Tutsis and Tutsis killing Hutus"- when the genocide was actually due to some people in

the Hutu-led government making a determined effort to exterminate Tutsis in Rwanda. This position provided an excuse for the international community to stand by and not take a stance against the Rwandan government.

Indigenous peoples have suffered attempted and actual genocide at the hands of white men. The Koori population in Victoria has been estimated to have declined by 60% from 1835 to 1850. Earlier in that century most of Tasmania's Indigenous peoples were killed during the 'Black War', and were then forced onto island reserves. Dozens of massacres have occurred across the continent, and over two hundred Indigenous language groups have died out (www.kooriweb.org/gst/genocide/essayhol.html).

While there was (understandably) Indigenous resistance to the occupation of their lands, this was not a situation of 'black fellas killing white fellas and white fellas killing black fellas'. White settlers directly and indirectly killed large numbers of Indigenous people, and the Australian government continued the attempted genocide through enclosed camps, reservations and forced removals of children.

Many Indigenous people are calling for sovereignty - for legal and other forms of recognition of their special relationships with the land and sea. Exercising sovereign relationships with the land would enable Indigenous peoples to make decisions, exercise their rights and regain their spiritual, social, cultural, legal and economic relationships that we have largely dispossessed them from.

Michael Mansell writes "We are the first people of this land. We have suffered every indignity ever meted out to a people. Yet our strength is in our determination. We did not consent to the taking of our land, nor of the establishment of the nation of Australia on our country. Our consent to being subsumed within the Australian nation was neither sought nor given. Our sovereign rights as a people remain intact."
(www.kooriweb.org/gst/sovereignty/back-to-basics.html)

I feel that we also need to listen to calls by Indigenous people for a treaty (or treaties, given that different Indigenous peoples may wish to develop their own treaties with non-Indigenous people). The development of treaties could enable us to relate with Indigenous peoples in ways where we no longer act as an occupying power of the land. They could lay out a way forward for how we can work together to be responsive to this precious earth on which we live and are a part of.

What could this mean for the rights that privileged non-Indigenous Australians take for granted? If Indigenous peoples do have sovereign relationships with this continent's lands and seas, should we be paying rent for occupying their land? What would Indigenous sovereignty mean for systems of government, and for decision-making at local and broader levels? How would our (generally northern hemisphere based) spiritual and religious practices be different if we recognised the particular sacredness through which Indigenous peoples carry out their special responsibilities to the land?

I would love to discuss these and other questions and issues with other non-Indigenous people, in ways that don't fall prey to the fears and myths that "they are coming to take our backyards away". Yes, I want to be open to the possibility that I may need to give up, or modify, some of the rights that I enjoy under white person's rule of these stolen lands, or at least to think of these rights in a very different way. There are some 'rights' that white

men insist upon in this world of corporate colonial capitalism that would be beneficial for us to transform anyway.

I feel that, in accepting the existence of genocide and attempted genocide, and holding open the questions concerning what Indigenous sovereignty could mean for us, we will need to deal with these uncertainties over a lengthy period before treaties are finalised. Indigenous peoples will need time, space and resources in order to discuss these issues with each other and to then enter into negotiations with us (however we define the 'us').

When the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation was established in the early 90's, it developed study guides through which people could get together in lounge rooms or community centres to learn about Indigenous history and the need for reconciliation. Maybe we need new circles of people coming together to discuss the issues of genocide, sovereignty and treaty. Maybe it is time for us, in our private thoughts, conversations with friends and colleagues, and among groups of people, to discuss what it could mean for us to truly co-exist with Indigenous peoples, and to unsteal the land.

Maybe it is time for us to learn from Indigenous peoples how we (like them) belong to the land, rather than living as if the land belongs to us.

In solidarity,

Rodney Vlasis

THINGS YOU CAN DO

* I am very happy to support people to start up discussion /conversation groups on these issues (and to start up one myself if others are interested in joining me), or to help facilitate discussions in existing networks, places and spaces in the community. Feel free to email me at rodney@foe.org.au if you are interested.

* For the many other actions you can take to support the Black GST campaign and to educate yourself on the issues of genocide, sovereignty and treaty, see www.blackgst.com

* Join the Black GST announcements e-list for newsletters and other updates on upcoming events, campaign news, etc - see <http://lists.riseup.net/www/subrequest/blackgst>

* Stay tuned for news on how you can be involved in Black GST solidarity events during the Stolenwealth Games, including a rally that non-Indigenous people can participate in.

* Feel free to forward this article on to others.